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Children

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Children

by Paul Jones

Journalism, Sr.

“**M**OANING, BRUTHAHS” he drawled as he stood shirtless and tanned in the noontime sun. “The name’s Jahnny Q. Markhol. Welcome to Gawd’s country and unfortunately, y’all cain’t turn in heah cause the glo . . . rious”—pronouncing glorious in a high stress falsetto—“lawmen locals have oh so inglo . . . riously demanded that we heah close this heah parking lot.”

I squinted in the yellow glare of the windshield and grinned as John Q. Markhol, splendid in his blond beard and big yellow “Official Child of God” badge, yelled at someone beyond our sight. “Heh, Andrew! What you saying these days?” He resumed his information. “I say, the reason is ’cause some of our rather unfortunate bruthahs have been dealing in some rather extraneous activities ovah the ridge there. So, I’ll recommend y’all truck on down this way about six mile to the junction with Highway 34 and turn right. Okay, man. That’ll take y’all rot in to the glo . . . rious north parking area. Okay, man. See y’all on the mountain-side.”

So we pulled out, destined to park in the glo . . . rious north parking area, and Johnny Q. Markhol waited and waved down the dirty gold volksbus that’d been waiting patiently behind us. We moved quietly toward the mountain, the flowered fields, and Marsha.

The car was bumping a minute ago, but now Douglas

turned the engine off. It was quiet. I opened the door and laughed in the Colorado sunshine. I don't remember why I laughed but it was a good laugh as laughs go. I stretched and laughed again. Dark haired, turquoise earrings, and she was standing on a small rock in front of the car clad in a flowing flowered dress, and she smiled. She cocked her head and pointed. "The road's up there. If you're lucky you can catch a shuttlebus, but you'll probably have to walk the eight miles to the trail." I took my shoes off. "It's a nice trip, if you know what I mean." I laughed for no reason, and she cocked her head again. "Where you from?"

I smiled and said, "Iowa ma'am," trying to turn the hick routine, shuffling my feet, hands fumbling around, grinning like my teeth could fall out. A dog ran past, a big brown one, probably a foreigner to these parts, unsure how to handle the pine-covered hillside. "The name's Paul, Iowa Paul."

"Marsha. Marsha from New Mexico," she mused.

"Got a nifty ring to it. Ever considered burlesque as an enhancing career, my dear?" I mused back. She laughed a little and stepped off the rock. Douglas was getting out of the car.

"Have a button," she smiled. She had a touch of yellow glitter on her cheek and smelled like the mountainside. The sun was very yellow. I grinned and giggled cause everything was yellow and stretched again. The button said, "Official Child of God." Like Marsha, like Johnny Q. Markhol. Like the advertisement. I was welcome and the sun was shining and Mexico Marsha, dark and golden and kind, had pinned this yellow button on me and a big yellow dog, or was it brown, had just run by . . . so I laughed.

The ad said: FESTIVAL OF LIGHT

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She said eight miles, and after four the hike was getting long, so wailing Doug and I sat down under this little droopy tree, staring out over the road and the lake, Grand Lake, protected to a small extent from the forces of change. Well, I was the only one concerned. Doug didn't particularly care. But transitions were getting me down: dark to light, sunlight to shade, laughter to crying. I couldn't figure out why anyone would cry on this day. For some reason I was stringing out, sitting under this droopy green-black scotch pine, hoping the world'd turn yellow and everybody'd smile and Mexico Marsha would miraculously appear from behind the big gray rock our packs were leaning on.

A thin cloud of red dust spreads out from the holy man's feet. His walking stick has dark brown spirals that curl up the worn shaft, and here and there light blue rings with tiny red stars cling to the long staff. The lake is blue, across the road, stretching through the immense mountains. Someone's riding in a motor boat, about a quarter mile out. The ripples quietly chew apart the reflection, a strong rooted hunk of mountain made to sway and swing to the whims of a small bouncing boat. The yellow sun and white snow and the pine tree's bothering me again. I lean back and the sun hits my face and I can read the letters on the boat. They're big and black and say POLICE. Two people are in the tiny boat alone in a sea of white and green hills that sway and ripple.

"Want a drink?" Douglas said after a little while. The water bottle was clear soft plastic, about half full.

"No thanks." The pine tree was a cobweb of intricate yellow-white lights, the sun shining through the tree. Sun-shade-sun-shade-sun. I closed my eyes 'cause it was burning me out and listened to the people walk by on their way to the mountain. A high strained voice jabbered about some guy telling him that the authorities expected fifty thousand people by nightfall. Another voice pitched in that his buddy has been hassled about two miles back by the local law. The glo . . . rious law, I thought. The cops, the voice said, were even giving shit to people pulling into the parking lot, telling them all kinds of neat stuff about atrocious happenings going on up here, trying to discourage them from coming up.

Douglas saw the little mountain-reflection-destroying boat. "Heh. Look. The cops."

My eyes were closed and I said, "Yea. I saw him a while ago. Is he still out in the middle?"

"No. H-h-he's a l-little closer, now." The world was red through my closed lids so I giggled and said, "Um."

"No shit, I m-mean the law is everywhere at this thing. Remember that c-c-copter we s-saw a c-couple miles back. And that little s-single engine that keeps playing around in the c-clouds?"

"J-Jeez" he stuttered. He pulled his harmonica out of his back pcket.

Douglas, Wailing Doug, or just plain Doug, is always doing that. He gets all hepped up and frustrated, like everybody does now and then, and he's got this little stutter that's really not too bad, but sometimes it really gets him down. And the only outlet he's got is his harp, his Hohner blues mouth organ. Doug's a Child of God and he wails, sings, laughs and cries through his harmonica. He's a player of the sorrows, a keeper of the blues, and it makes me smile to watch him.

The boat pulled closer and closer. And closer. Douglas was into a tune, playing around with the scale, his old eyes closed, brows up. People kept walking by, some laughing, most talking and looking at the lake, one or two crying, crying in the mountain solitude and warm sunshine. The tree was bothering me again. The boat pulled closer and closer. We were alone in the flickering shade watching the people. This one tall thin guy, dressed in shorts and green boy-scout knee-socks, a tee-shirt, a monstrous red pack, and long straight brown hair looked at me and said, "C'mon, Morris. Let's go over here." The thing probably named Morris was a beagle puppy stumbling and snooping around in tall thin guy's tracks. The boat was a little closer. Rocking in the cold-looking waters, two men were standing up, glaring at the shore. One was fat and had sunglasses, aviator type, the other, fatherly looking, had his hand on the wheel.

Little swirls of settled red dust were on tall thin guy's hiking boots. He nodded hello, his moustache drooping like

this damn tree. Douglas opened his eyes in the middle of a long inhale and nodded. The boat was light blue. Its windshield reflected yellow, like Marsha, like the dog, like the button, like Marsha's speckled tanned cheek. Damn this tree. The boat pulled into shore.

The beagle ran across the road. "Morris, get the hell back here!" rang the tall thin guy. "Sorry friend, just can't control the mighty beast."

"No sweat, "I murmured.

"The name's Stephen," the tall thin guy said.

"Paul and Wailing Douglas," I replied. Douglas was still playing. "Iowa boys lost in the horizons of a yellow deity and a red, radiant sun."

"Stephen, the mad beagle owner, known in Biloxi as a part time wild man and true connoisseur of the tender art of house training."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," I grinned from behind closed eyes. "We are of lesser fame, yet are well known in the stockyard set as diggers of the great turd."

"Nobly said, dear friend." Morris, the puppy beagle and pseudoslave of mad Biloxi Stephen was back.

"How old is he?"

"He's a her, and she's about a half-year old. Always was partial to the name Morris."

"Could you please stand up, son."

Stephen fished around in his pack for a minute, pulled out this warped mandolin and started to tune it. Wailing Doug stopped playing, looked at Steve and me and smiled. "Th-this definitely has interesting possibilities." They tuned. I gazed, looking at the light-filled tree. Something poked a cold nose in my hair, a wet thing that breathed rapidly in and out, in and out. "At least she's healthy," I thought. The sun was behind a high white cloud, and I considered how dark it was getting. I turned around and stared into those sad beaglesque eyes. "Well, I'll be snooked," I thought, "another yellow dog." "How's it going, guy?" Beagle Morris yawned, evidently bored. Wheeling around, nearly tripping over her ears, she went forking around in the pine-needle brush. So I turned and closed my eyes again, and the sun came out.

Strains of a mandolin harmonized with a mouth organ as Mad Steve and Wailing Douglas found a song they both

knew. Oh, God, the blues . . . and the world is so red in the warmth of July. Those everlovin' blues.

"Could you please stand up, son."

People trodding by, red dust, and occasional shuttle bus crammed with bodies, and I look so small against that tree, a raisin drying in the sun, the last cracker in the barrel, a friend of Marsha, oh Marsha, why can't you be here?

Blackness, and the redness is gone, the wind suddenly chilly, not a thought of a dog, a microbus, a button, a beagle, or Marsha to be seen. Play the blues on a quiet mountain road as I deck out and wonder why we can't all smile and be happy.

"Could you please stand up, son." I peeked. Silhouetted against our light-filled tree, tall, obese, and sinister looking in his cool aviator shades, stood the law.

"Yea, sure." Doug and Mad Steve were already standing. The man's partner was behind Douglas, leaning against our droopy tree, the father figure who had his hand on the wheel. Momentary visions flashed of steel helmeted, grim-jawed, insane with bigotry, Bircher Colorado storm troopers stomping my poor curly head into the glo . . . rious Colorado undergrowth.

Fat man's vest pocket said DAVIS, and his silver star said GRANBY SHERIFF DEPARTMENT, and his belt buckle said COLORADO STATE PATROL. He was a walking dictionary. The khaki uniform made him look more like an overweight scoutmaster, but he stood there and watched as I stood up. Mad Steve held his mandolin in one hand. "Where you from, son?" he asked from behind those impersonal, green glasses.

I tried to be poetic. "The golden fields of beautiful Iowa, sir."

"What part?" he asked back.

"Northwest. Sioux City," I murmured, getting a little pissed off.

"Um" he said, and I regretted saying that to Douglas awhile ago.

People were starting to gather around, probably five or so, and there were a few taunts and titters. Davis's partner, Mr. Father Image, and Tree Leaner asked Mad Steve what he had in his pack.

Steve looked at the pack, trying to remember, and said,

"Uhh, three packs of cigarettes; a can of beef stew; one church key; water; one pair of leggings . . ."—he was getting into remembering now—" . . . some paper; one hunting knife, boy scout regulation; two packs of matches, one from Santa Clara Sierra Club, and the other from, uhh . . ." He scratched his forehead.

Somebody said, "Stick it out, friend." We had the crowd's support.

"Uhh, oh yeah, the other's from the Bango Bango Bar in Ruleville." Scattered applause. "One spoon; an extra pair of socks; one tarp tent, army surplus from Metarie, Louisiana, if the old memory serves me correct; and one can of Alpo dog food for my monster beast, wherever he is." I repressed a smile, and now there were a couple more people standing around in the red dust.

Oh, the sky is so yellow and I'm so free in the sunlight and if I could I'd fly over that white shining mountaintop and laugh and laugh and laugh and look for Marsha. And finding her we'd sail away on a rug of woven meadow flowers, tiny four-petaled things that glisten in the dew. And I'd kiss her glittered cheek and we'd laugh and play on the hillside in the summer dandelions and be so free.

Douglas piped in, "L-look, sirs, we're j-just h-h-here to enjoy the country."

"Look at all this," Mad Steve said. "Have you ever seen so many people smiling and coming together? The good times are here, man, mankind . . . all these young, idealistic minds fused into a single blissful weekend cause. And no one gets bent. Everyone wins. There's gonna be a discomfort or two and a few bad times, but everything's fine, all are welcome."

Davis looked at Steve and then at the twenty kids standing behind him. "Is that what you all say, too?" he said to the whole bunch. His hands were in his pockets. One came out and scratched his tanned forehead. He took his sunglasses off. It was quiet.

Brush crashed behind everyone, and Morris the beagle came blitzing down the hillside behind the droopy tree. He stumbled over a branch half his size and let out a puppy squeak as he rolled in the sunshine for a foot or so. Everyone watched as he shook his head, regained his dog pride, looked

us all over once or twice, and clambered back up the hill, barking a squeaky high bark that made me smile, and it came together.

I was welcome and the sun was shining and Mexico Marsha, Johnny Q. Markhol, the advertisement, Morris, Mad Steve, the onlooking twenty, we all were welcome. And Marsha with her golden speckled glittering cheek and those long lashes had pinned this yellow button on me and, damn it, I knew I was welcome. The scoutmaster cop was staring up the hill where I could hear Morris yapping and he's welcome too.

"Here, man," I said and handed him the button. He turned and looked at it and said nothing. "No. Take it, the locals'll love it."

His eyes flickered to us all, taking in the situation, but I thought those eyes had something behind them. I hoped. Mad Steve was smiling. All the people were in a little ring, a small audience to an act in one play, a theatre in the round, and they were smiling too.

Morris came screaming down the hill for a second attempt, totaled out again, and took a little longer getting up, pine needles sticking here and there to his fur. He held up a paw, giving us those sad beagle eyes, and whimpered and I smiled and Davis let out a little chuckle from somewhere inside that scoutmaster body. "Yea, son. Thanks." And he took the button, still looking at painful-eyed Morris. "Better grab your dog before he kills himself."

Mad Steve said, "It's a she." Davis looked at him and at the button and let out another chuckle. "Whatever you say, son." "Cm'on, Mark. Got some work to do."

Morris hobbled over to Steve as the glorious and local lawmen walked back across the road. Mr. Davis was gone and Doug played a little run on his harmonica and everybody kind of drifted away, back to the common journey. "Let's get out of here, man," Doug said.

"Sure."

We put on our packs and strolled down the dusty road, Doug talking to Steve, and I looking for Marsha on the warm mountainside. And I smiled as I imagined the droopy pine tree laughing in the sun.